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SUBJECT: "CULTURE" IS NO EXCUSE FOR ABUSES

REF: MOSCOW 2338

¶1. (SBU) Meeting with us to discuss a GOR attempt to water down UN Human Rights Council work by introducing a resolution on "respect for traditional values" (reftel), a member of the MFA's Department of Human Rights and Humanitarian Cooperation acknowledged deep flaws in Russia's protection of rights and democratic freedoms. He also recognized the limits of the "cultural relativism" argument used by some to denigrate the primacy of human rights protection. He asked for patience as Russia attempts to reform, and predicted a more fair society for his children. Our human rights contacts also pinned their hopes on the younger generation, while asking us to keep up the pressure on the GOR to deliver on its rhetorical promises. End Summary.

Playing the "cultural relativism" card

¶2. (SBU) On September 11, we met with Andrey Lanchikov of the MFA's Department of Human Rights and Humanitarian Cooperation to discuss a GOR attempt to introduce a resolution on "respect for traditional values" into the work of the UN Human Rights Council (reftel). By promoting this initiative, the GOR seeks to put forth the idea that human rights, rather than being universal, are contingent on a nation's culture.

¶3. (SBU) The "cultural relativism" argument is not a new one. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects fundamental rights and freedoms, such as the right to life and freedom of expression, but it also protects individual cultures. Under the cultural relativism argument, a member of a culture whose practices violate human rights may argue that anyone attempting to prevent him from carrying out these practices is violating his cultural rights.

A choice between human rights and Russian culture?

¶4. (SBU) In Russia, cultural relativism provides opponents of meaningful human rights and civil society promotion with a convenient excuse for inaction or obstructionism. They portray the idea of universal human rights as Western, and incongruous with Russian culture. During the course of its existence for over a millennium, the Russian nation has had little or no experience with civic freedoms. The post-Soviet euphoria was short-lived, and the past eight years have seen a slide back to what some consider Russia's "natural state," in which the majority of people support a strong, autocratic hand steering the ship of state (the Russian word for "to govern," "rukovodit'," literally means to steer something with one's hand).

¶5. (SBU) The economic reality of the past two decades has led many Russians to associate the poverty and chaos of the 1990s with civic freedoms, and the wealth of the Putin years with his moves to curtail those freedoms. According to the popular nationalist narrative, eagerly fed by GOR statements, U.S. support for reforms in the 1990s was part of a plan to

keep Russia down, which failed when oil wealth -- and Putin's wise policies -- brought Russia "back from its knees." Working in this environment to promote human rights puts the U.S. in a delicate position; those who oppose expanding civil society use any linkage with Western countries to promote their narrative that the U.S. is working to destabilize Russia via a "color revolution." We frequently must maintain a balancing act, striving to help those who work to hold their government accountable, without making them appear to be puppets in our employ.

Don't believe it

¶6. (SBU) The view that Russians do not want more freedom is superficial, and under closer examination is not borne out. Andrey Rikhter told us September 9 that anyone who argues that Russian culture is not conducive to human rights and individual freedoms has "not been paying close attention to this country," and may even have a patronizing or condescending view of the Russian people. According to Rikhter, the "people power" visible in the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1991 was not an anomaly. Even now, in polls Russians consistently support principles such as a free press and a multiparty system. A June Levada poll indicated that 57 percent of Russians would prefer to see the return of direct gubernatorial elections. More directly, a July Levada poll showed 57 percent of Russians answering "yes" to the question, "Does Russia need democratic freedoms?", with 67 percent of Russians aged 25-40 agreeing.

Lanchikov: Problems are "no secret," but be patient

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¶7. (SBU) Even members of the GOR have acknowledged to us the limits of the "cultural relativism" argument as an obstacle to promotion of human rights. Lanchikov noted that the concept of "Russian culture" is complicated, as Russia consists of a number of different cultures, not only among its myriad of ethnic groups (at the "rossiskiy" level), but also within traditional Russian Orthodox groups (at the "russkiy" level). He alluded to the American joke that if there are two lawyers in a room, that means there are three opinions, and he applied this idea to Russians as well. Boris Bogdanov noted that culture need not be thought of as a "bounded entity," fixed and unchanging; on the contrary, its borders are "porous and fluid," and it naturally changes over time and receives outside influences. Lanchikov admitted that different civilizations, no matter how diverse in the trajectory of their development, have always included respect for human rights in some form; human rights "are not something alien" in any culture.

¶8. (SBU) Lanchikov showed surprising candor in his assessment of the current state of human rights in Russia. He said that Russia's problems stem not from its laws, but from their de facto enforcement, the flaws of which he called "no secret." He said that the GOR "needs to work on this better," and he intimated that, as a private citizen, he himself finds it frustrating living in a society without an established rule of law applied fairly to everybody. At the same time, he counseled patience, saying that the GOR is working on creating new practices and standards, as well as attempting to stamp out corruption, but that "we can't expect it all to change in one hour." He added that the GOR is aware of its international obligations in this area, and noted that average citizens also have an obligation to educate themselves better about their rights.

Our contacts agree

¶9. (SBU) Perhaps ironically, Lanchikov's call for patience is echoed among our human rights contacts. Exhorting us "not to

give up," and not to abandon rights defenders who "need your support now more than ever," Moscow Helsinki Group's Lyudmila Alekseyeva nonetheless told us, "Don't get discouraged when we don't meet our shared goals overnight." Grigoriy Shvedov agreed, advising us to develop a long-term strategy that will gradually raise consciousness and change social norms. As Shvedov noted, for truly meaningful systemic changes to take place, people will need to overcome their own passivity; help from the outside is valuable, but only up to a point.

¶10. (SBU) Both Lanchikov and our human rights activists therefore prefer to take the long view. Lanchikov, while offering his veiled complaint about living under the current system, said, "I think my children will have a better life than I do." We have heard this statement almost verbatim on numerous occasions from our contacts, many of whom are getting old and thus pinning their hopes on the younger generation. That the July Levada poll in favor of increased freedoms (para 7) showed a notable upward bump when applied to younger people appears to bolster this belief.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) We should reject simplistic statements such as "Russia's culture does not allow for individual rights." At the same time, it would be equally simplistic to view the Russian populace as teeming with eagerness to topple the status quo. The weakness of Russia's legal institutions and the lack of a viable watchdog on government activity are symptomatic of an absence of fair, equal rules applicable to everyone. For this reason, Shvedov is correct when he suggests that a change in social norms will be an integral part of any meaningful reform. Some liberals cling to the hope that recent GOR statements decrying the ossified and corrupt system of oligarchs, clans, and abuses of personal freedoms indicate a sincere desire to implement meaningful change. However, in the long run the "porousness and fluidity" of Russian culture may prove a more effective vehicle for real change, at both the top and bottom levels of society.

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